

John Jeremy's

BLUES LIKE SHOWERS OF RAIN and JAZZ IS OUR RELIGION

Two classics of British Documentary return to the big screen

Hyde Park Picture House, Leeds | Tuesday 27th May 2025

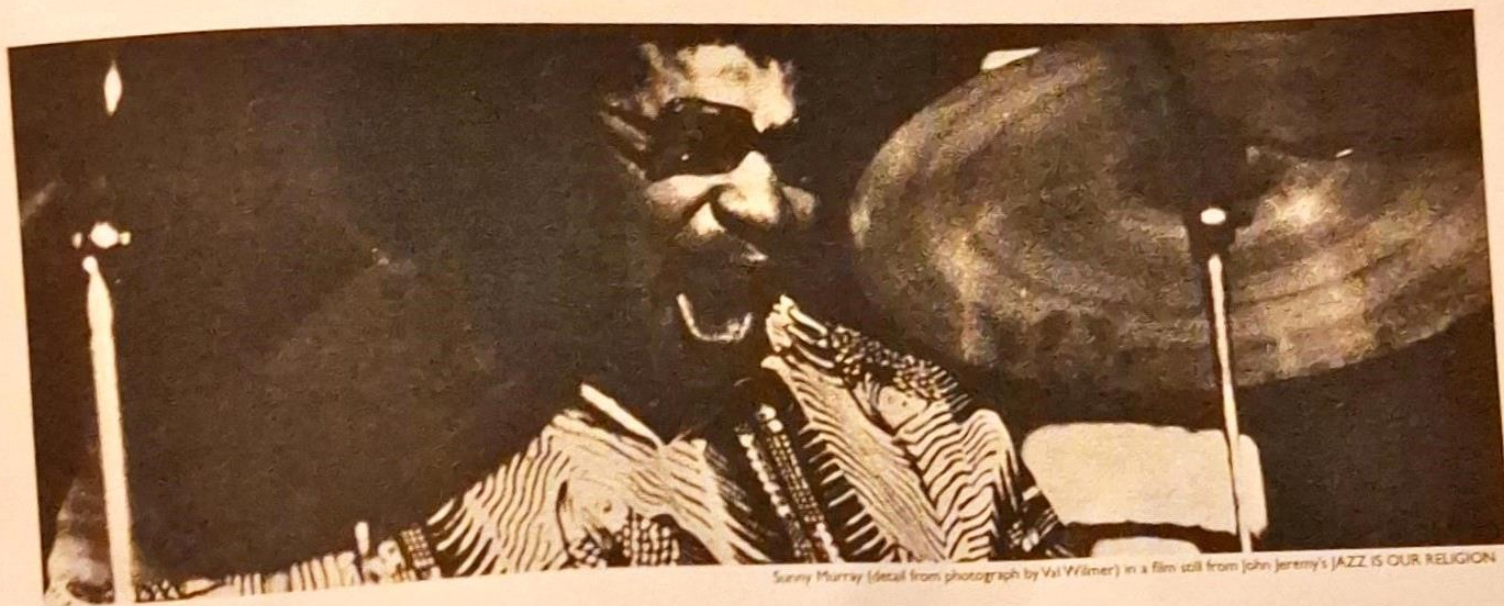
BLUES LIKE
SHOWERS
OF RAIN

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JAZZ
IS OUR
RELIGION

Presented in association with

Leeds Jazz Festival and The Hyde Park Picture House



Sunny Murray (detail from photograph by Val Wilmer) in a film still from John Jeremy's JAZZ IS OUR RELIGION

www.johnjeremy.co.uk



BLUES LIKE SHOWERS OF RAIN

"I been down so long
Being down do not worry me no more"
J.B. Lenoir in *Blues Like Showers of Rain*

had heard performing on rare 78rpm discs, interview them and capture performances of their music. This journey yielded a treasure trove of images and sound recordings, some of which were utilised in BBC radio programmes in the early 1960s and published in his book *Conversation with the Blues*, ushering in the emerging British blues craze.

At this time John Jeremy (b. 1940), a professional film editor, sought a move into directing and in light of his own love of jazz and the blues, he contacted Paul Oliver in 1965 to inquire about a possible film project. The outcome was *Blues Like Showers of Rain*, a potent short film that utilised Oliver's unique audio-visual materials (among others). The film made a significant impact on its theatrical release, playing in central London for several months, yet has fallen out of general awareness in the 50 years since. In keeping with Paul Oliver's belief that the blues must be considered inextricably with the social conditions from which the music emerged, John Jeremy's film tackles unflinchingly the racially segregated America that gave rise to the blues, that transcendent art form described by author Ralph Ellison as, "an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically." John Jeremy's own 35mm prints of both of this evening's films were accessioned into the US Library of Congress Film Collection in 2024 for preservation. Tonight's screenings are digital scans from the archival 35mm prints held at the BFI.

BLUES LIKE SHOWERS OF RAIN

Dir. John Jeremy, UK, 1970 (30')



A classic short documentary about the blues offering unflinching insight into the conditions that gave birth to this form of music in America, and charting the evolving sound of the blues as musicians moved from rural areas into the cities. Director-editor John Jeremy deftly combines the field recordings and still photographs of the British blues historian Paul Oliver gathered on a pioneering collecting trip through the United States in 1960.

Featuring: Blind Arvella Gray, Otis Spann, J.B. Lenoir, Little Brother Montgomery, Willie Thomas, Edwin Buster Pickens, Billie Pierce, Wade Walton, Robert Curtis Smith, Lonnie Johnson, Henry Townsend, Sunnyland Slim, Robert Lockwood, Lightnin' Hopkins, James Butch Cage, Jim Brewer, St. Louis Jimmy, Charles Love, Sam Price, James Stump Johnson, Speckled Red.

The soundtrack is pure poetry... a marvellous documentary – The Observer

A beautifully edited film ... the film is remarkable – The Guardian

This short film is itself worth a visit to the cinema – Evening Standard

JAZZ IS OUR RELIGION

"Jazz is not for everybody. Some people don't want to give themselves to the music, they want the music to give to them, but it has to be both ways."

Dewey Redman

(Interview with John Jeremy, 1971)

Jazz and the cinema are natural partners: both emerged in the United States as side-show attractions at the beginning of the 20th Century and (eventually) gained recognition as serious art forms. Film and jazz were combined by animators in the 1930s-40s, when the likes of Norman McLaren and Oskar Fischinger edited abstract colour films to fit jazz 78s on the soundtrack. In 1944 Gjon Mille explored atmospheric expressionism in his classic film *Jammin' the Blues*, yet in mainstream cinema appearances in films by black bands were carefully designed to be in self-contained sequences. This made them easy to delete should exhibitors in the southern United States decree. As the tools of cinema production became more accessible and portable from the late 1950s, radical documentary film methods were applied to jazz subjects by European independent filmmakers who were themselves jazz devotees (e.g. *Momma Don't Allow*, Karel Reisz/Tony Richardson, 1956; *Jazz and Poetry*, Louis van Gasteren, 1964; *Mingus*, Thomas Reichman, 1968). And from the UK at this time came groundbreaking jazz documentaries by young filmmakers such as Dick Fontaine (1939-2023) and John Jeremy.

Jazz Is Our Religion, directed, edited and produced by John Jeremy, premiered at the London Film Festival in 1972. Jazz film historian **David Meeker** has described it as the first "total jazz film", so effectively interwoven are the cinematic elements of sound and image. With its lyrical blend of stills and moving images, this is a virtuoso feat of film editing that retains full documentary credentials.

The majority of the jazz stills employed in John Jeremy's film are the work of the distinguished photographer **Val Wilmer** (1941-) whose knowledge of and access to the African-American jazz world in the late 1960s/early 70s was unrivalled. Wilmer's photographs give us something very different from the 'cigarette and silhouette' school of jazz photography familiar to all. As Val once said, "A good picture is something that tells me a story about the person." The poet **Ted Joans** (1928-2003), reading his own and **Langston Hughes'** poems with a characteristically musical delivery brings to *Jazz Is Our Religion* a hip, performative dynamic. Rarely referenced today, Ted Joans was an important link in the continuum of black American spoken word artists who, along with LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka), bridged the gap between Langston Hughes and late-sixties proto-rap collective *The Last Poets*.

In 1972 **Jazz Is Our Religion** played in select UK repertory cinemas and received some notable critical acclaim, but the film has since slipped off the radar. By the time the BFI's *Sight and Sound* published its 'Greatest Documentaries of All Time' in 2014 not one of the 327 participating critics so much as mentioned it. Perhaps the absence of a DVD re-issue or theatrical re-release contributed to this omission. So it is fitting that, 50 years on, *Jazz Is Our Religion* should return to the cinema screen to play before the current generation of jazz and film lovers.

JAZZ IS OUR RELIGION

Dir. John Jeremy, UK, 1972 (50')

Jazz poems: Langston Hughes and Ted Joans, read by Ted Joans

Photography: Val Wilmer; Vernon Layton

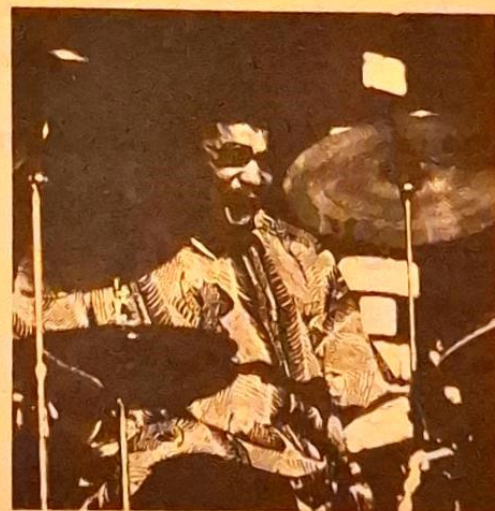
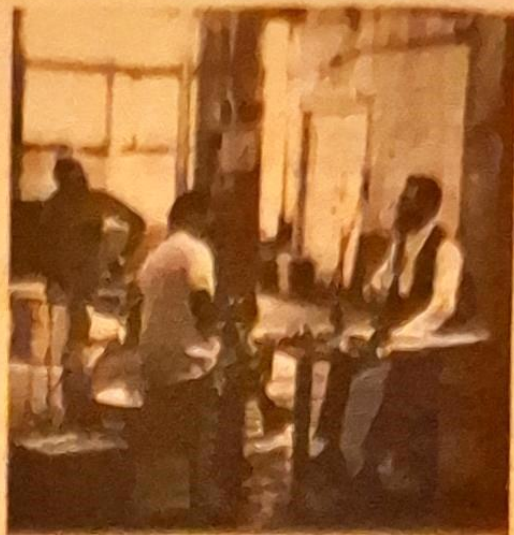
Music: Johnny Griffin, Dizzy Reece, Jon Hendricks, Lol Coxhill, Alan Shorter, Sunny Murray

With: Rashied Ali, Ed Blackwell, Art Blakey, Marion Brown, Kenny Clarke, Andrew Cyrille, Richard Davis, Bill Evans, Julio Finn, Jimmy Garrison, Dizzy Gillespie, Eddie Gomez, Johnny Griffin, John Hendricks, Jo Jones, Blue Mitchell, Sunny Murray, Morris Oliver, Dewey Redman, Ghanaba.

A brilliant fifty minutes – Into Jazz

This is terrific cinema – The Real Paper

A deeply felt, concentrated lyrical documentary – BBC World Service



John Jeremy's

BLUES LIKE SHOWERS OF RAIN

and

JAZZ IS OUR RELIGION

John Jeremy is a British documentary filmmaker who was active professionally for over forty years and earned a distinguished reputation as a director of jazz documentaries. Starting out as an assistant film editor in the late 1950s, John's debut as director was the landmark short **Blues Like Showers of Rain** (1970), followed by the remarkable cinema-poem **Jazz Is Our Religion** (1972). John went on to direct eleven jazz documentaries which have been internationally recognised and he is one of a minority of filmmakers whose career successfully spanned both cinema and television. Since 1970, his films as Director on Jazz & Blues have contributed substantially to a specialist but burgeoning genre. They are the recipient of a slew of international awards at such major festivals as New York, Chicago and San Francisco and have been screened in the Cinémathèques of a dozen countries.



John's career as a producer-director began in 1970 with the short subject *Blues Like Showers of Rain*. Alexander Walker commented: *This film alone is worth a visit to the cinema. This was quickly joined by Jazz Is Our Religion, rated a masterpiece by one Boston newspaper on the occasion of its US Theatrical Premiere at the city's Orson Welles Cinema, and Born To Swing, which attracted the comment by American critic Nat Hentoff that it was So valuable it should be added to your will.*

In the 1980s John was a contract producer-director for London Weekend Television, contributing three films to *The South Bank Show*. He also directed *Billie Holiday: The Long Night of Lady Day* for PBS/BBC Arena, a film subsequently nominated for two Emmys. Two more musical documentaries followed in the next decade, this time for Channel 4, plus a further film for BBC on Jewish history, *The Last Exodus*. All three were award winners. Parallel to this defining career as a producer-director, John still found time to develop his talents as a writer with several screenplays written on commission. Nor did he forsake his first love, being entrusted by Paul Joyce to edit major profiles for British Television on Stanley Kubrick, Sam Peckinpah and Robert Altman, amongst others. Although designed for TV, critic Pauline Kael wrote of the Peckinpah profile that it was: *So good it should be shown in cinemas.*

In recent years John has been developing educational projects based upon his unique personal library of African history and culture, and has acted as mentor to emerging filmmakers.

Programme notes by Stewart Morgan Hajdukiewicz (c) 2015

"After viewing John Jeremy's films for two nights the magnitude of his conception only begins to sink in. The music and the musicians are the whole essence of his films. Never before, as far as I know, has the basic philosophy of jazz music been so clearly expounded."

John Norris (Coda Magazine, 1973)

John Jeremy – Jazz Filmography as Director:

BLUES LIKE SHOWERS OF RAIN (1970)

JAZZ IS OUR RELIGION (1972)

BORN TO SWING (1973)

TO THE COUNT OF BASIE (1978)

THE LONG NIGHT OF LADY DAY:

The Story of Billie Holiday (1984)

PREZ – A JAZZ OPERA (1985)

THE REAL COTTON CLUB (1985)

THE HISTORY OF BOOGIE-WOOGIE (1988)

BEN WEBSTER: THE BRUTE AND THE BEAUTIFUL (1989)

SWING UNDER THE SWASTIKA:
The Story of Jazz in Nazi Germany (1989)

DJANGO LEGACY (1991)